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More humanitarian aid, less military aid needed in Guatemala

Mary Ann McGivern | Mar. 27, 2012 NCR Today

Loretto has brought Sister Gloria from Guatemala [1] to visit and participate in our works as a way to celebrate Loretto's 200th anniversary. I am accompanying her for two weeks.

Last week, Gloria and I visited Congress. We were joined by the two members of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission to visit staff of Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee; Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., member of the Senate Armed Services Committee (and my senator); and Rep. Richard Larson of Washington, member of the House Armed Services Committee.

The United States sends about $150 million in military aid to Guatemala, but less than $15 million in humanitarian aid. Most simply, we would like to see those figures reversed.

We would like to see training in community policing, not military use of force. Training of foreign armies has proved over and over to be the gift that keeps on giving as soldiers leave the army to provide security for drug lords and terrorists. We know that this is happening in Guatemala.

In 2009, the Department of Defense stopped reporting on training operations, though WikiLeaks gave us some information. But basically, we don't know how that $150 million is being spent this year. So we asked for transparency.

Gloria described to these staff members of our Congress how insecure the people are. She sees soldiers marching past the school where she teaches. They were acting with civilians and local police, but now, more and more, they are acting alone. Further, guns are more readily available to young men. Criminal violence is on the rise.

One of the men we met with explained that secrecy on military operations training in Latin America is heightened because there is an al-Qaida threat there. He said we were not going to find out how that $150 million is being spent. Nonetheless, he said he would ask, and he suggested we ask through the Foreign Relations Committee as well as Armed Services. It is an important issue, he said, even though the war in Afghanistan takes most of the attention.

We will keep asking. You, dear reader, might ask too.

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